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2 Italy: Revival and Innovation

Despite the need to revise the accepted account of the Renaissance, which presents the Italians as active and creative and other Europeans as passive and imitative, it is impossible not to start with Italy. This section is therefore concerned with the principal changes in the arts, literature and ideas from Giotto (d. 1337) to Tintoretto (1518–94), and from Petrarch (1304–74) to Tasso (1544–95). It will attempt to replace these changes – whether revivals or innovations – in their cultural and social contexts. It is obvious enough that there was no lack of creative individuals in this period, men – they were indeed males for the most part – who impressed their personalities on their works. All the same, if we look at the course of cultural change in Italy over the long term, over the three hundred years 1300–1600, it becomes equally obvious that the achievements are collective in the sense that small groups worked together and that each generation built on the work of its predecessors. In a relatively brief essay it seems best to stress the collective and to try to see the Renaissance movement as a whole.

What is especially distinctive about this movement is the whole-hearted attempt to revive another culture, to imitate antiquity in so many different fields and media. This is not the only important feature of the Italian Renaissance, but it may not be a bad place to begin.

The revival of classical forms is most obvious in architecture, from the ground-plans to the ornamental details [35, 36, 37]. It is no surprise that this revival should have taken place in Italy, where a number of classical buildings had survived more or less intact, including the Pantheon (Plate 5), the Colosseum, the Arch of Constantine and the Theatre of Marcellus (all in Rome itself), while the climate made the imitation of these buildings more practical in the south of Europe than it could be

elsewhere. Generations of architects, including Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446), Donato Bramante (c.1444–1514), and Andrea Palladio (1508–80), went to Rome to study and measure these buildings in order to follow the principles on which they were built. Their studies were assisted by the survival of a treatise on architecture written by an ancient Roman, Vitruvius. His *Ten Books of Architecture* was first published in 1486 or thereabouts. Vitruvius emphasised the need for symmetry and proportion in architecture, comparing the structure of a building to that of the human body. He also explained the rules for the correct employment of the ‘three orders’, in other words the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian columns with their appropriate friezes, cornices and so on. The classical system of proportions was followed in such buildings as Brunelleschi’s churches of San Lorenzo and Santo Spirito in Florence, and Leon Battista Alberti’s San Francesco at Rimini. Bramante’s San Pietro in Montorio in Rome (Plate 2), built in 1502 broke with the traditional medieval cruciform church plan to follow the circular plan of a typical Roman temple; hence its Italian nickname of the ‘little temple’ (*Tempietto*). It was also the first church to utilise the full Doric order. Also reminiscent of a Roman temple is the grand portico of Palladio’s Villa Foscari, nicknamed ‘the discontented woman’ (*La Malcontenta*), built at Fusina near Venice a little before 1560. In this case the order utilised is the Ionic. Roman country houses or villas had not survived, so Renaissance villas, from Poggio a Caiano in the 1480s to Pratolino in the 1570s (both built for the Medici family), drew on the descriptions of his country houses and gardens in the letters of the ancient Roman writer Pliny the younger [38].

In the case of sculpture, there was no ancient treatise like that of Vitruvius, but classical models were of enormous importance all the same [33, 34]. The sculptor Donatello went to Rome, like his friend Brunelleschi, in order to study the remains of classical antiquity, while Buonaccolsi (nicknamed *Antico*), who became famous for his small bronzes, was sent to Rome by his patron, the marquis of Mantua, for the same reason. By 1500 it had become fashionable for Italians of taste to collect classical marbles, and one of the greatest enthusiasts was pope Julius II. Julius owned most of the masterpieces which had been unearthed in his time, including the Belvedere Apollo (named after the papal villa in which it was displayed), and the still more famous Laocoön, which illustrates a

scene from Homer's *Iliad* in which a Trojan priest is crushed by serpents sent by Apollo. The new genres of Renaissance sculpture were generally classical genres revived, such as the portrait bust, the equestrian monument, and the figure or group illustrating ancient mythology, such as the young Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (Plate 4), which imitated the classical style with such success that it was believed for a time to be a genuine antique.

In the case of painting, ancient sources and models were much harder to find. There was no equivalent of Vitruvius or even the Laocoön. Apart from a few decorations in Nero's Golden House at Rome, classical painting was unknown at this time, and would remain so until the excavation of Pompeii in the late eighteenth century. Like their colleagues in architecture and sculpture, painters wished (or were encouraged by their patrons) to imitate the ancients, but they had to use more indirect means, posing figures in the positions of famous classical sculptures, or attempting to reconstruct lost classical paintings from descriptions in literary texts [24, 25]. Botticelli's *Calumny* (Plate 3), for example, follows the description of a lost work by the painter Apelles given by the Greek writer Lucian. There was also an attempt to derive rules for painters from the literary criticism of the ancients, on the principle that, as Horace put it, 'as is painting, so is poetry'. Music was another art in which attempts were made – especially in the 1540s and 1550s – to recreate the ancient style on the basis of literary sources, in this case classical treatises [87].

The rise of the portrait as an independent genre was one of the trends which was encouraged by the example of antiquity. Fifteenth-century portraits were usually painted in profile as if imitating the heads of emperors on Roman coins, and they were usually cut short below the shoulders as if they were equivalents of ancient marble busts. It was only around the year 1500 that Leonardo, Raphael and other artists emancipated themselves from this convention, to produce works without classical precedent which showed the sitter in full- or three-quarter-face, half- or full-length, sitting or standing, conversing with friends or giving orders to servants [31].

In painting, however, there was at least one crucial development of the period which took place without reference to antiquity: the discovery of the rules of linear perspective. It is possible that ancient artists had known these rules, but they

were lost until their rediscovery by Brunelleschi and his friends in the fifteenth century, an example which illustrates the affinity between the two ages and suggests that the similarities between them cannot be explained in terms of imitation alone.

In both classical and Renaissance times, artists were particularly concerned with the appearance of things, with what Burckhardt called 'realism'. The word is left in inverted commas not only because it has more than one meaning (illusionistic style; subject-matter taken from 'real life', whatever that is, and so on), but also because all artists represent what is real to them and because there can be no art without conventions. Even perspective can be regarded, in the words of the art historian Erwin Panofsky, as a 'symbolic form'. In other words, representing the world according to certain rules meant accepting certain values and rejecting others [29].

In the case of medieval artists, these values have to be inferred from their work, with the consequent danger of a circular argument. Even in the case of Giotto, his concern with three-dimensionality, more especially the solidity of the human figure, has to be inferred in this way. In Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, artists and others not infrequently expressed their ideas about art in writing and even, at the end of the period, in print, in Vasari's *Lives* and elsewhere. They make very clear what problems they were attempting to solve in their art and also their appreciation of such qualities as 'truth' to nature, the illusion of life, the apparently effortless overcoming of difficulties, and, hardest of all to define, 'grace' [6: ch. 6; 20].

Architecture, sculpture and painting have been discussed first because it is of the visual arts that most of us now think first when we hear the word 'Renaissance'. In the period itself, however, literature and learning, the so-called 'liberal arts', were taken more seriously (at least by the learned) than the 'mechanical arts', a category in which painting, sculpture and architecture were lumped together with agriculture, weaving and navigation, despite the protests of Leonardo and others. The social status of the painter was little different from that of a carpenter, mason or weaver, especially at the beginning of the period. It was only gradually that the new profession of the 'artist' emerged [28, 30].

The metaphor of rebirth was usually applied not to the arts but to *bonae litterae*, 'good letters', in other words language, literature and learning. This was at any rate the opinion of the scho-

lars and writers whose accounts of the great revival have come down to us, since artists (with the distinguished exception of Vasari) left few records of their views on the subject. It is important to keep in mind this bias in the surviving evidence. The main language which was 'reborn' or 'revived' at this time was not Italian, but classical Latin. Medieval Latin was coming to be regarded as 'barbarous', in its vocabulary, its spelling (*michi* in place of the classical *mihi*), its syntax, and so on. 'Not only has no one spoken Latin correctly for many centuries', wrote the scholar Lorenzo Valla in the 1440s, 'but no one has even understood it properly when reading it.' In his day, however, it became the ambition of some scholars to write Latin like Cicero.

These scholars also revived the principal literary genres of ancient Rome: the epic, the comedy, the ode, the pastoral, and so on [74]. As early as the mid-fourteenth century, Petrarch produced a Latin epic, the *Africa*, based on the life of the great Roman general Scipio Africanus. It was the first of many imitations of Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which heroic deeds were narrated according to a set of conventions which included beginning in the middle (with later flash-backs), and alternating deeds done on earth with debates in councils of the gods. Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581), a story of the First Crusade, is at once one of the most deeply christian and profoundly classical of Renaissance epics.

In similar fashion, Italian tragedies were written in the melodramatic manner of Seneca, piling the stage with corpses, and comedies in the style of the ancient Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence, complete with heavy fathers, cunning servants, boastful soldiers and mistaken identities. Poetry in Latin and Italian included odes in the manner of Horace, epigrams in the manner of Martial, and pastorals in the manner of Virgil's *Eclologues*, in which shepherds play their pipes in an Arcadian landscape and sing of their yearning for their loves. Ideas were frequently presented in the form not of treatises but of dialogues, inspired by those of ancient writers, notably Plato, Cicero and Lucian. Histories of Florence, Venice and other Italian states were modelled on Livy's history of Rome, while biographies (including Vasari's lives of artists) followed the paradigm of Plutarch's lives of famous Greeks and Romans.

The fact that vernacular literature was taken less seriously than Latin – before 1500, at least – deserves emphasis. Although

Petrarch is most appreciated today for his Italian love-lyrics, he would probably have preferred to have been remembered for his *Africa*. Paradoxically enough, it was a dead language, classical Latin, which was the language of innovation. There was a time-lag of more than a century between the first Renaissance comedies in Latin and their equivalents in Italian such as Ludovico Ariosto's *Suppositi* (1509), and Bernardo Bibbiena's *Calandria* (1513). Leonardo Bruni's Latin *History of the Florentine People* goes back to the early fifteenth century, while the first Italian work in the same class, Francesco Guicciardini's *History of Italy*, was written more than a hundred years later [43, 48]. When contemporaries mentioned the revival of 'letters', they were generally referring not so much to literature in the modern sense as to what is known today as the rise of humanism.

'Humanism' is a somewhat elastic term, with different meanings for different people. The word *Humanismus* came into use in Germany in the early nineteenth century to refer to the traditional type of classical education, the value of which was beginning to be questioned, while Matthew Arnold seems to have been the first to use the term 'humanism' in English. As for 'humanist', the word originated in the fifteenth century as student slang for a university teacher of the 'humanities', the *studia humanitatis*. This was an ancient Roman phrase to describe an academic package of five subjects in particular: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, ethics and history [5].

The reader may well be wondering what was particularly human about the humanities, defined in this way. They are so called, wrote Leonardo Bruni, one of the leaders of the movement to revive these studies, because they 'perfect man'. But why should these five subjects be regarded as perfecting man? The fundamental idea was that men (in other words humans, generally viewed by male humanists in male terms) are distinguished from animals primarily by the ability to speak and therefore to distinguish right from wrong. Hence the fundamental subjects of study were those dealing with language (grammar and rhetoric) or with ethics. Both history and poetry were regarded as kinds of applied ethics, teaching students to follow good examples and avoid evil ones [46]. The scholars of the period were not afraid to generalise about the 'human condition' (as the Florentine humanist Poggio Bracciolini called it), or to compose orations, like

the young aristocrat Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, on the 'Dignity of Man' – though this text was not intended by Pico to be a declaration of independence from God [116].

Nor was it intended to be a declaration of the subordination of women. The question of the 'dignity and excellence' of women was often debated in Renaissance Italy, especially in court circles, and women found some distinguished defenders. In Petrarch's time his friend Giovanni Boccaccio compiled the biographies of a hundred and six famous women, from Eve to Queen Joanna of Naples. Castiglione defended the excellence of women in a separate treatise before including a debate on the subject in his famous *Courtier*. At the end of the sixteenth century, two Italian women produced books in defence of their sex, Modesta Pozzo's *The Merit of Women* (1587), and Lucrezia Marinelli's *Nobility and Excellence of Women* (1600). In a certain sense of the term, 'feminism' goes back to the Renaissance [95, 98].

The basic assumptions of the humanists are neatly illustrated in a diagram from an early sixteenth-century treatise by the French humanist Charles de Bouelles (Plate 6). According to this diagram (following Aristotle) there are four levels of existence. In ascending order they are: to exist (like a stone), to live (like a plant), to feel (like a horse) and to understand (like a man). There are four corresponding kinds of human being; the sluggard, suffering from 'sloth,' the glutton; the vain person, represented holding a mirror; and the scholar sitting at his lectern. In other words, humanity is perfectible, but only the humanist is truly human.

The diagram also implies that the life of contemplation, or study, is superior to the life of action. There was in fact no consensus on this issue among humanists. Leonardo Bruni, who was active as chancellor of the Florentine republic, argued that a man could fulfil himself only as a citizen (this is why he has been called a 'civic' humanist), while Marsilio Ficino, a Florentine philosopher who accepted the patronage of the Medici, preferred contemplation [42, 43]. Outside Italy, humanists were also divided on this issue. Erasmus protected his liberty to study and write and refused to be tied down by political or academic commitments. Others were torn between the two ideals. Sir Thomas More found the decision whether or not to become a councillor to Henry VIII (and later Lord Chancellor) a difficult one to

take. Montaigne retired to the tower of his country house in order to study, but left it again to become Mayor of Bordeaux at a time of civil war [109, 114, 113].

It will be obvious that the studies most emphasised by the humanist movement did not include what we call 'science' (a common term at the time was 'natural philosophy'). However, some leading humanists, Leon Battista Alberti for instance, were interested in mathematics in particular. In any case, the recovery of the texts of ancient Greek and Roman writers on mathematics, medicine, astronomy, astrology and (not least) magic was part of the humanist programme, and the classical texts were virtually indispensable for the future development of these studies. It may therefore be argued that there was a mathematical, a scientific and even a magical 'Renaissance' in this period [50, 51, 91–3]. In the cases of Brunelleschi, Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci, the links between the arts and the Renaissance of mathematics and science are particularly obvious [35, 110].

In what sense was there a 'rise' of humanism in Italy between 1300 and 1600? Just as there were attempts to revive classical art and literature, an effort was made to imitate the educational system of ancient Rome. One of the pioneers of the new kind of education was Vittorino da Feltre, who ran a small boarding-school at Mantua from 1423 to 1446; another was Guarino da Verona [42, 45: ch. 1]. The new system involved teaching the students to speak and write as well as to read classical Latin, and it also meant an emphasis on the humanities, especially rhetoric, at the expense of other subjects, notably logic. Logic had been central to the introductory arts course in medieval universities, but it was attacked by Petrarch and other humanists on the grounds that it was futile, mere quibbling or hair-splitting, and that it required the use of 'barbarous' (in other words, non-classical) technical terms like 'substance', 'accidents', 'quiddity' and so on [53: ch. 7].

In a few schools and in some Italian universities, notably in Florence (from 1396 onwards), and in Padua (from 1463), it was also possible to study ancient Greek. Classical Athens was not yet such an object of admiration as classical Rome, but the Greek language did attract students. The first professors were refugees from the Byzantine Empire, which was falling piece by piece to the Turks long before the capture of Constantinople in 1453.

Thanks to these refugees, some Italian scholars acquired the ability to read important Greek texts in the original language. Some of these texts were newly discovered, including many dialogues of Plato and the works of the mysterious 'Hermes Trismegistus' (believed to be an ancient Egyptian sage), which were translated by Ficino, whose admiration for Plato was so intense that he and his followers are often described as 'neoplatonists' [50: chs 1–4; 53: ch. 3].

Other texts now studied in the original Greek, such as the New Testament and the works of Aristotle, had previously been known in Latin translations. However, the humanists discovered serious discrepancies between these translations (sometimes re-translations of Arabic translations from the Greek) and the original texts. It was because he had read Aristotle in the original Greek that the sixteenth-century Italian philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi became convinced that his medieval predecessor St Thomas Aquinas had been wrong to suggest that Aristotle taught the immortality of the soul. This was to call in doubt the whole Thomist synthesis between Christian doctrine and Aristotle. Thus the quest for accurate translations had as an unintended consequence the discovery that the ideas of the much-admired ancients were more remote and more alien than had formerly been assumed [52: ch. 4].

According to the humanists, even classical Latin texts had long been misunderstood, when they had not been lost altogether. The rediscovery of the classics was an exciting event in the lives of scholars such as Petrarch and his follower Coluccio Salutati (who recovered Cicero's letters between them), and Poggio Bracciolini (who found some of Cicero's speeches). However, it turned out that different manuscripts of the same text contained different readings of key words, so that techniques had to be developed for 'textual criticism', in other words the recovery of what the author had originally written before the chain of copyists distorted the message [126: ch. 12; 130].

Classical texts which had been known in the Middle Ages were given new interpretations. Roman law had been studied in Italian universities, notably Bologna, from the eleventh century onwards, but the humanists were the first to interpret these laws by placing them in the context of the culture and society of ancient Rome, which the study of classical literature and

inscriptions was making more familiar to them. It was, for example, his knowledge of Roman history, and more especially of the history of the Latin language, which allowed the humanist Lorenzo Valla to demonstrate, in the middle of the fifteenth century, that the so-called 'Donation of Constantine', a document in which the emperor granted central Italy to the pope and his successors, had nothing to do with Constantine but was written several centuries later. According to Valla, the style of the document was so barbarous that it had to be of later date than it claimed to be [66: ch. 1].

There were two apparently contradictory elements in the attitude to antiquity held by the humanists and the artists associated with them. On the one hand, they were much more conscious than their medieval predecessors of the distance between the classical past and the present, and concerned with what they called the corruption of the language and the decline of the arts after the barbarians invaded Italy. On the other hand, they felt personally close to the great Romans. Petrarch wrote letters to Cicero and others, while Machiavelli described himself as conversing with the ancients. Both men believed that antiquity could be revived. Petrarch took a sympathetic interest in the attempted restoration of the Roman Republic, which lasted – within the city walls – from 1347 to 1354. Machiavelli argued passionately in his *Discourses on Livy* that ancient Roman political and military arrangements, such as the citizen militia, could and should be imitated by modern states [115, 111].

To understand the significance of the revival of classical forms in architecture, say, or in the drama, or the enthusiasm for the discovery and editing of ancient manuscripts, we need to view them as portions of a far more ambitious enterprise. It was nothing less than the restoration to life of ancient Rome. What could this mean? It is not always easy to decide whether the humanists were writing literally or metaphorically, or exactly how much of the past they wanted to bring back. However, the basic idea of revival was much more than a figure of speech. Like the ancients, many humanists believed in a cyclical interpretation of history, according to which one age could be a kind of recurrence or re-run of an earlier one. Some of them thought that they and their fellow-citizens could become 'new Romans', in the sense of speaking like the Romans, writing like them, thinking like them, and

emulating their achievements, from the Colosseum and the *Aeneid* to the Roman Empire itself. This idea of a return to the past may have been a myth (as was suggested above). All the same, it was a myth which some people not only believed but lived.

One of the key concepts of the humanists was that of 'imitation'; not so much the imitation of nature as that of great writers and artists. Today, this idea has come to sound strange. We have become accustomed to the idea that poems and paintings are expressions of the thoughts and feelings of creative individuals, and although we are aware that some artists do in fact imitate others, we are inclined to think of this as a sign of their lack of talent or an error on the part of people who have yet to 'find themselves' and develop their personal style. 'Imitation' has become a pejorative term. Writers and artists are anxious to emphasise their originality, spontaneity and independence, and to deny the 'influence' of their predecessors (let alone plagiarism, which has come to be regarded as the theft of someone else's intellectual property). In the Renaissance, on the other hand, although charges of plagiarism were beginning to be made, writers and artists tended to suffer from exactly the opposite anxiety. Although we tend to think of this period as an age of innovation and originality, the artists and writers themselves stressed their imitation of the best ancient models; the Pantheon, the Laocoön, Cicero, Virgil, Livy and so on [77, 78].

This imitation was not slavish. To use a favourite metaphor of the time, it did not 'ape' the ancients. The aim was rather to assimilate the model, to make it one's own, and even, if possible, to emulate or surpass it. It was generally assumed that the 'moderns' had no hope of equalling the achievements of the ancients, let alone of going beyond them, but this assumption was itself a challenge to which some people responded. Michelangelo was able, as we have seen, to pass off one of his statues as a genuine antique. Alberti wrote a Latin comedy which was mistaken for a classical work. A sixteenth-century humanist, Carlo Sigonio, 'discovered' a lost work of Cicero's, which turned out to be a creation of his own.

How close imitations should keep to their originals was a matter for controversy. The poet-scholar Angelo Poliziano was one of those who emphasised the need to maintain some distance from classical models, however prestigious. 'Those who compose on

the basis of imitation alone strike me as parrots or magpies bringing out things they don't understand. Such writers lack strength and life' [78: ch. 8]. The sixteenth-century Venetian critic Pietro Bembo believed in imitating Cicero when writing in Latin, but he was also concerned to make Italian a dignified literary language, with the fourteenth-century Tuscan writers Petrarch and Boccaccio as the best models, the modern 'classics'. Bembo's friend Castiglione discussed the paradoxical aspect of imitation. One character in his *Courtier* declares that if we imitate the ancients we do not imitate them, because the ancients themselves did not imitate anyone, to which another character replies that the ancient Romans imitated the Greeks.

The growing sense of historical distance made imitation problematic. 'Whom did the ancients imitate?' some people were asking. Did imitation become inappropriate as times changed? Whether they liked it or not, Renaissance artists and writers were unable to imitate the ancients in more than a partial manner. For one thing, the products of antiquity had survived only piecemeal. In painting, as we have seen, and also in music, there were no products of antiquity available for imitation. Painters and musicians were forced to be free. However, the lack of specific models in certain genres was a minor problem compared with the fundamental fact that the Italians of the Renaissance lived in a very different world from that of the ancients. Their economic, social and political system was very different from that of ancient Rome, with its senators and slaves, its legionaries and latifundia. In this situation the ideal of restoring ancient Rome to life could never be more than a dream.

In reality, Petrarch, Brunelleschi, Alberti, Valla, Mantegna, Ficino, and other scholars, writers and artists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were in many ways distant from what they felt was close – ancient Rome – and close to what they felt was distant, the 'Middle Ages'. Although they rejected the recent past of what they called 'Gothic' art, 'scholastic' philosophy, and 'barbarous' Latinity, they had been brought up in this late medieval culture and in many ways still belonged to it. Trained as they had been in Gothic script, for example, they found ancient Roman inscriptions difficult to read.

Rejecting the late Middle Ages they knew, the humanists sometimes mistook the early medieval period for the antiquity

they so much admired. When, for example, the humanist Poggio devised the handwriting which we call 'Renaissance' or 'Italic', he thought he was following classical exemplars, but these exemplars actually came from the early, pre-Gothic Middle Ages. In similar fashion Brunelleschi took the Baptistery in Florence as a model for his architectural reforms, thinking that it was a classical temple, whereas it has turned out to be an example of the Tuscan Romanesque, probably built in the eighth century [126: ch. 27].

Continuities with the Middle Ages are visible as late as the sixteenth century, even in the work of such exemplary 'Renaissance men' as Lodovico Ariosto and Baldassare Castiglione. Ariosto's most famous work is the narrative poem *Orlando Furioso* (1516). It bears the marks of Ariosto's study of classical epic, but even more obvious is its debt to medieval romance, notably to the Charlemagne cycle (Orlando is none other than the hero Roland). The poem is no ordinary romance of chivalry; it treats the medieval material too ironically for that. But it is no simple imitation of classical epic either. It could only have been written by someone who in a sense belonged to both traditions, and so to neither. Ironical detachment is the only possible stance for someone with a foot in both camps [74: part 2].

Again, Castiglione's well-known *Courtier* (1528), despite its references to ancient precedent, notably to Cicero's treatise on the perfect orator, is concerned to discuss the rules for playing a social role unknown in classical Athens or republican Rome but very well known in the Middle Ages. It may be described as a medieval courtesy-book rewritten under the influence of classical ideals of behaviour, or as a creative adaptation of those ideals to fit a non-classical situation. Like Ariosto's poem, it could only have been written by someone with an intimate knowledge of both traditions, ancient and medieval [86, 106].

One area in which the ambiguities and conflicts inherent in the humanist position became manifest was the writing of history. Leonardo Bruni and Lorenzo Valla were among the historians who wanted to write about the recent Italian past while following the model of Livy's history of Rome, including the model of Livy's language. Yet their subject-matter made this impossible; there was no classical Latin term for Lombardy, for example, or for the political factions of Guelf and Ghibelline, for Muslims, for

cannon, and so on, because these institutions, groups and objects had not existed in Roman times [47]. It was not possible to pour all the new material into the classical mould. Giorgio Vasari wrote his *Lives* of painters, sculptors and architects in Italian, thus avoiding these linguistic problems, but his work too reveals a tension between his admiration for recent art and his admiration for antiquity. His borrowings from classical texts such as Plutarch's *Lives*, or Cicero's account of the rise and fall of rhetoric or Pliny's *Natural History* cannot hide the fact that his enterprise had no parallel in classical times, and that the reason it had no parallel was that the ruling class of Greece and Rome had not taken artists as seriously as they were being taken in the age of Michelangelo.

However, the contradictions in the humanist position were most obvious when they discussed religion. With very few possible exceptions they were, after all, Christians, not worshippers of the pagan gods. Petrarch, Alberti, Valla and Ficino were all clerics. Alberti and Valla were both in papal service, while the humanist Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini became pope Pius II. Petrarch, Valla and Ficino all wrote on theology, while Alberti designed churches and wrote the biography of a saint.

Individual creations of the period may sometimes imitate ancient models very closely, but their social and cultural contexts and functions were very different. Many works of the Renaissance are what have been called cultural 'hybrids', classical in some ways but christian in others [24]. For example, an epic poem might be written in classical Latin on the model of Virgil's *Aeneid*, yet deal with the Nativity (as in the case of a work by Jacopo Sannazzaro), or with the life of Christ. A humanist theologian writing in Latin might refer to churches as 'temples', to the Bible as 'oracles', or to Hell as 'Hades', or give a treatise, as Ficino did, the title *Platonic Theology*. A Renaissance tomb might imitate a classical sarcophagus (complete with winged personifications of Victory), yet combine this with images of Christ or the Virgin Mary [33].

This combination of classical and christian is difficult to interpret, as syncretism often is, because it may have been undertaken for such different reasons. After four hundred years, it is not easy to decide whether Ficino was dressing Platonism up as theology or dressing theology up as Platonism. Nineteenth-century histor-

ians, including Burckhardt, tended to present the Italian humanists as essentially 'pagans', who paid no more than lip-service to Christianity. Today, on the other hand, scholars are more likely to argue that it was to paganism that lip-service was paid. The use of classical phrases such as 'oracles' in christian contexts may have meant no more than an attempt to write 'pure' Latin. Or it may have been a kind of learned game, like the painter Andrea Mantegna and his friends calling themselves by Roman titles such as 'consul' when they made an excursion to Lake Garda one day in 1464 to look for classical antiquities.

To note the superficiality of some forms of 'paganising' is not to deny that there was some degree of tension between classical values and christian ones, or that contemporaries were conscious of this, or that it worried them. Similar problems had arisen in early christian times. The Fathers of the Church, Augustine and Jerome for example, belonged to two cultures, the traditional classical culture and the new christian one, and they tried, with more or less difficulty, to harmonise the two, to reconcile Athens with Jerusalem. In the case of Jerome, the internal conflict was so acute that it expressed itself in dramatic form, in his dream of being dragged before the court of Christ and condemned for being 'a Ciceronian, not a Christian'.

The Fathers resolved this conflict by means of a compromise, expressed in picturesque fashion by Augustine in his famous image of the 'spoils of the Egyptians'. When the Israelites went out of Egypt, the Old Testament tells us, they took Egyptian treasure with them. In similar fashion, whatever is valuable in the pagan classics may be appropriated by Christians and put to their own uses. In any case, some early Christians believed that the ancient Greeks had learned true doctrine (the so-called 'ancient theology') from the Jews. 'What else is Plato', wrote Eusebius in the fourth century, 'but Moses speaking Attic Greek?'

This compromise appealed to the humanists, whose problem was of course the opposite one of reconciling traditional christian culture with the rediscovered classics. Many of them were interested in the Fathers of the Church, and some, like Ficino, in the ancient theology [64: chs 1-2]. A few scholars, such as the fifteenth-century Greek refugee Gemistos Pletho, may possibly have abandoned Christianity for the worship of the pagan gods, but most humanists wanted to become ancient Romans without

ceasing to be modern Christians. Their desire for harmony led them to interpretations of ancient texts which now seem somewhat far-fetched, such as treating Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* as allegories of the soul's progress through life. However, every age tends to see the past in its own image, and we must not imagine that our own is an exception.

In the case of the visual arts, the meaning of the revival of ancient forms is harder to interpret than in the case of literature, because we usually lack evidence of the artist's intentions, but there are signs of attempts to reconcile antiquity with Christianity and also of the use of early Christian models. The circular plan of Bramante's *Tempietto* (Plate 2), for instance, is reminiscent not only of pagan temples but also of a particular type of early Christian church built to commemorate a martyrdom, and San Pietro in Montorio was indeed built to mark the spot where St Peter was supposed to have been crucified [35: ch. 6]. In the case of Michelangelo, his poems help us interpret his paintings and statues, leaving us in no doubt of his desire to combine classical forms with christian meanings [112].

However thoroughgoing it was supposed to be, the revival of antiquity was not intended as a substitute for Christianity. To admit this is of course to blur the distinction between Renaissance and Middle Ages, since classical forms had been imitated in the 'Romanesque' art which preceded the Gothic (as its modern name implies), while classical poets such as Virgil and Horace had been studied in medieval monasteries and universities [126]. We should not see the Renaissance as a cultural 'revolution' in the sense of a sharp or sudden break with tradition. It is more accurate to think of the movement as a gradual development, in which more and more individuals became more and more dissatisfied with elements of their late medieval culture, and more and more attracted to the classical past.

Why did this happen? This question is the most difficult of all, not because it is hard to imagine possible answers but because it is impossible to nail these answers down with precise evidence. Was the cult of antiquity a means to an end, a way of justifying the break with the recent past? Or were these people interested in the ancient world entirely for its own sake? To be plausible, any explanatory account of this collective attempt to revive ancient Greece and Rome must make sense of three factors; the

geography of the movement, its chronology and its sociology. Why should such a movement have arisen in north-central Italy? Why should it have gathered increasing momentum in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? And why should it have appealed in particular to urban patricians? Let us take these three questions in order.

It does not look like an accident that the revival of antiquity began in Italy, on the very site of the original achievements, for it was Rome, not Greece, which was the main object of enthusiasm – Virgil rather than Homer, the Pantheon not the Parthenon (only rarely did humanists visit Athens, at that time part of the Ottoman Empire). In a metaphorical sense, the humanists were discovering their ancestors, while some noble families claimed literal descent from ancient Romans (the Cornaro family of Venice from Scipio's family, the Cornelii, for example). The material remains of antiquity – coins, tombs, temples, amphitheatres and so on – were relatively familiar to Italians, including of course Italian artists. Indeed, it is difficult to decide whether the classical inspiration in eighth-, twelfth-, or even fourteenth-century Italian art should be interpreted as survival or revival. When imitations of antiquity became more frequent, more thorough and more self-conscious, we speak of the 'Renaissance', but in Italy, unlike other parts of Europe, the classical tradition had never been remote.

Chronology is more of a problem. If the remains of antiquity had so long been part of the Italian landscape (or, in the case of some classical texts, part of the stock of libraries in Verona and elsewhere), why should they have been taken so seriously only from the time of Petrarch onwards? The obvious answer to this question is that the example of antiquity must have come to seem more relevant to contemporary needs. So what had changed? The most conspicuous change was the rise of the north Italian city-state in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in other words the seizure of self-government by the towns [7]. The rise of these towns can be explained in economic terms, by the increasing trade between Europe and the Middle East. It is not difficult to see why the merchant oligarchies should have wished to be independent, and the location of these towns on the borders between the dominions of the pope and the emperor made the achievement of independence a smoother process than it might

otherwise have been. The ruling groups of these cities came to see themselves as 'consuls' or 'patricians'; their town councils as the equivalent of the 'Senate'; the cities themselves as so many new Romes. The links between independence and identification with antiquity are particularly clear in the case of Florence at the beginning of the fifteenth century, when the threat from Milan helped make the Florentines and their spokesman, the humanist chancellor Leonardo Bruni, more conscious of who they were and of the values, such as 'liberty', which they were defending [16, 43]. But this dramatic episode is only part of a much longer story of a growing sense of affinity with the Romans, to be found in the towns of northern Italy from the twelfth century, if not before.

Attempting to explain the chronology of the Renaissance has already raised the third question, that of its social basis. It is clear that the Renaissance was a minority movement. It was urban not rural, and the praises of the countryside, in pastoral poetry for example, flowed from the pens of individuals whose main residence was their house in town, not the country villa to which they might retreat during the summer. Within the towns, the revival of antiquity appealed to a minority, or more exactly to three minorities. There were the humanists, who tended to be professional men, teachers or notaries. There were the members of the ruling class, patricians, prelates or princes, who extended their patronage to new forms of art and learning. There were also the artists, who were recruited in the main from the children of urban craftsmen and shopkeepers [6: ch. 3].

To what extent humanists and artists shared the same interests is far from clear. Some paintings, such as Botticelli's *Calumny* (Plate 3) or his *Primavera*, presuppose a knowledge of ancient literature which the artist, who left school at thirteen, is unlikely to have possessed, and it has been suggested that the 'programme' of the latter painting must have come from a humanist adviser such as Ficino or Poliziano, who are likely to have been acquaintances if not friends of Botticelli [25: ch. 3].

On the other hand, it is uncertain whether most humanists understood the passionate interest shown by Brunelleschi, Donatello and other artists in the formal aspects of ancient architecture and sculpture. Alberti, who was a friend of Brunelleschi, Donatello and the painter Masaccio, and wrote plays and dialogues as

well as designing buildings, was one of the few men to bridge the gap between these two cultures. Even Leonardo da Vinci, despite the breadth of his interests, remained on one side of the divide [110]. The 'universal man' who could master all skills was a contemporary ideal, but it is difficult to find many people who incarnated it, even in an age in which the pressure to specialise was much less than it is today.

In short, the revival of antiquity did not have the same meaning for every social group. It meant something different in Florence, Rome, Venice and so on. This point becomes particularly obvious if we consider the development of the movement over time. In the fourteenth century, we see an increasing interest in the classical past on the part of a handful of enthusiasts, notably Petrarch, who, far from being 'one of the first truly modern men', belonged to late medieval culture, even if he was coming to reject some of its elements. In the fifteenth century, the movement comes to involve leading members of the ruling class, including popes (notably Nicholas V and Pius II), princes (such as the rulers of Ferrara, Mantua and Urbino) and of course Lorenzo de' Medici, the unofficial ruler of Florence. A few women studied the classics at this time and wrote letters and treatises in Latin, though they sometimes discovered, like Isotta Nogarola of Verona, that male humanists, such as Guarino, refused to treat them on equal terms with men [45: ch. 2].

By the sixteenth century, thanks in part to the more rapid diffusion of ideas facilitated by that new invention, the press – the printing of images as well as the printing of texts – an increasing amount of classical culture was assimilated, and the tiny group of early enthusiasts had turned into a large one, including a considerable number of teachers. Indeed, it was now possible to be introduced to many of these ideas and ideals at school. It was becoming fashionable for nobles to discuss the ideas of Plato (as they are shown doing in Castiglione's *Courtier*), to collect classical statues, to commission portraits of themselves, or to have town houses and country villas built in what was called the 'ancient' style. The poetry of Petrarch and Ariosto was familiar to artisans and shopkeepers as well as to the upper classes.

By this time a considerable number of Italian women were involved in the Renaissance movement. A few were active as artists, from Marietta Tintoretto, who assisted her father, to the

noble amateur Sofonisba Anguisciola, who painted portraits of family and friends. Many more wrote poetry in the Petrarchan style, including Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara, and the Venetian courtesan Veronica Franco. Other ladies were active as patrons, notably Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua, an enthusiastic art collector who acquired works by such masters as Giovanni Bellini, Perugino, Leonardo and Titian [94, 97].

This enlargement in the public for the Renaissance was not the only significant development in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There were other changes too. The best-known account of the different phases of the movement is the one given by the artist-historian Giorgio Vasari, who distinguished three periods in the arts: early, middle and what is now known as 'High' Renaissance [20]. Vasari writes as if the achievements of each age surpassed those of the one before, while the goals remained the same. It may be argued, however, that the aims of artists and writers gradually changed during the period. In architecture and literature alike, a concern to create according to ancient principles, interpreted flexibly, congealed into an ideal of following the 'rules' encoded in ancient examples. One might say (exaggerating a little for the sake of clarity) that a movement which had once seemed subversive (to some scholastic philosophers at least) had, by the year 1500 or thereabouts, become part of the establishment. It had been institutionalised, routinised, and incorporated into tradition.

Outside Italy, however, the revival of antiquity was still a novelty in 1500. The movement had not yet lost its power to shock. It is to what was happening outside Italy that we must now turn our attention.